

Rene` Descartes Father of Modern Philosophy

By
Staff Writer



Rene Descartes was the scientist and philosopher of our modern Era. He was a famous French mathematician, scientist and philosopher. His views about knowledge and certainty, as well as his views about the relationship between mind and body have been very influential over the last three centuries.

René Descartes was born to Joachim Descartes and Jeanne Brochard on March 31, 1596 in La Haye (now called Descartes), France near Tours. He was the youngest of the couple's three surviving children. The Descartes clan was a bourgeois family composed of mostly doctors and some lawyers.

He was educated at the Jesuit College of La Flèche between 1606 and 1614. Descartes later claimed that his education gave him little of substance and that only mathematics had given him certain knowledge. In this lament he joins a chorus of seventeenth century philosophers including Bacon, Hobbes and Locke. He went to Holland in 1618 to serve in the army of Prince Maurice of Nassau, and travelled to Germany with the army. On the night of November 10, he had a series of dreams which he interpreted as signs of universal science. The most important influence on Descartes at this time was the mathematician Issac Beeckman, who stimulated Descartes by posing a number of problems and discussing issues in physics and mathematics with him. His first substantial work was the *Regulae or Rules for the Direction of Mind* written in 1628-9 but not published until 1701. This work shows Descartes interest in method which he shared with many sixteenth and seventeenth century scientists, mathematicians and philosophers.

Descartes is clearly convinced that the discovery of the proper method is the key to scientific advance.

In November 1628 Descartes was in Paris, where he made himself famous in a confrontation with Chandoux. Chandoux claimed that science could only

be based on probabilities. This view reflected the dominance in French intellectual circles of Renaissance skepticism. This skeptical view was rooted in the religious crisis in Europe resulting from the Protestant Reformation and had been deepened by the publication of the works of Sextus Empiricus and reflections on disagreements between classical authors. It was strengthened again by considerations about the differences in culture between New World cultures and that of Europe, and by the debates over the new Copernican system. All of this had been eloquently formulated by Montaigne in his *Apology for Raymond Sebond* and developed by his followers. Descartes attacked this view, claiming only that certainty could serve as a basis for knowledge, and that he himself had a method for attaining such certainty. In the same year Descartes moved to Holland where he remained with only brief interruptions until 1649.

In Holland Descartes produced a scientific work called “the World” which he was about to publish in 1634. At the point, however, he learned that Galileo had been condemned by the Church for teaching Copernicanism. Descartes’ book was Copernican to the core, and he therefore had it suppressed. In 1638 Descartes published a book containing three essays on mathematical and scientific subjects and the *Discourse on Method*. These works were written in French (rather than Latin) and were aimed at the educated world rather than simply academics. In 1641 Descartes followed this with the *Meditationes de Prima Philosophia* (*Meditations on First Philosophy*). This short work is more metaphysical than scientific, and aims to establish the certain foundations for the sciences which Descartes had announced in his confrontation with Chandoux in 1628. The work was published together with *Objections and Replies* from a six (and then seven) philosophers and theologians, including Thomas Hobbes, Pierre Gassendi and Antoine Arnauld.

After the *Meditations*, Descartes produced *The Principles of Philosophy* in 1644, the most complete statement of his mature philosophy and of the Cartesian system in general. Part I explains Descartes’ metaphysical views. Part II gives a detailed exposition of the principles of Cartesian physics. Part III applies those principles of physics to give a detailed explanation of the universe, and Part IV deals with a wide variety of terrestrial phenomena. Two more parts were planned, to

deal with plants and animals and man, but were not completed. In 1648 Descartes published “Notes against a Program” — a response to a pamphlet published anonymously by Henricus Regius, Professor of Medicine at the University of Utrecht. Regius had been an early and enthusiastic supporter of Descartes. But when Regius published his *Foundations of Physics* Descartes complained that Regius had shamelessly used unpublished papers of Descartes to which he had access and had distorted Descartes’ ideas. The “Notes” both illustrate the kind of academic controversies in which Descartes was involved during this decade, but also provides some insight into his views about mind and his doctrine of innate ideas.

Descartes’ last work *Les Passions de l’âme* was written in French, and published in Amsterdam and Paris in 1649. This work is composed of a large number of short articles. Princess Elisabeth had raised the question of how the soul could interact with the body in 1643. In response to Elisabeth’s questions, Descartes wrote a short work which developed into the *Passions of the Soul*. The work is a combination of psychology, physiology and ethics, and contains Descartes’ theory of two way causal interaction via the pineal gland.

Two months before the publication of the *Passions* Descartes set sail for Stockholm, Sweden, at the invitation of Queen Christina of Sweden. In Stockholm, Descartes caught pneumonia and died on February 11, 1650

Acknowledgement:

Most of the material in this article was collected from the internet encyclopedia of philosophy, Descartes’ “An overview”. Please visit this website: www.lep.utm.edu./d/descarte.htm. for additional information on this famous mathematician, scientist and philosopher.

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NAR Foundation
6714 Beach Blvd.
Buena Park, CA 90621, USA
Email: narfoundation@yahoo.com